

Neslen, Arthur: *Occupied Minds. A Journey through the Israeli Psyche*. Pluto, London – Ann Arbor 2006. 291 S. ISBN

The founding-father's and founding-mother (Golda Meir) of Israel wanted to create a nation of "new Jews" which will never be led to the "slaughter-house" again. Therefore, Israel had to be strong. In the light of the Nazi-horrors which came upon the Jewish people in Europe a more than understandable attitude. In the course of time this strength became a synonym for 40 years of occupation and oppression. Rightly, the journalist Arthur Neslen who worked for Al Jazeera, asked how it could happen that the former "victims" turned into "perpetrators" still see themselves as "victims".

The author grew up in a family in which held to the traditions of the Bund, a secular and anti-Zionist Jewish socialist party that once was the mainstream of East European Jewish life. In the 1970s and 1980s it was still possible to stick to views in some Jewish communities, Neslen. Today, Israel has come to dominate Diaspora existence. The interviews the author conducted are about Israeli Jewish identity. The picture he was "more complex and sad". "The Zionist 'counter-identity's' something I still find ugly, but Israelis themselves are rarely monsters – and never two-dimensional." Neslen's book "is an exploration of the world through the Israeli mind's eye".

Theodor Herzl, the "father of modern Zionism" and the author of the book "Der Judenstaat" wanted Israel to become "a nation like others". From the establishment of a Jewish state he expected the solution of the rampant anti-Semitism in Europe. This idea was a false conclusion.

„To Herzl, becoming 'a nation like others' involved the dissolution of traditional Jewish identities a nationalist cauldron."

It is the notion of equality among other nations and peoples which the so-called friends of Israel do not want to materialize. They argue that Israel is something special and different from all the other nations. In 1948, Zionism was still a heresy to the majority of the world's religious Jews because it rejected holy scriptures, which prophesied the state's founding only after the Messiah's arrival.

Israeli society is dominated by Ashkenazim who are ethnically European Jews. They wanted to build a modern, secular European-style Jewish national identity in which the Mizrahim who are Eastern or Oriental Jews were only numbers. The Ashkenazim hold the most important centres of political and economic power. By contrast, almost half of the population consists of Mizrahim who lived well integrated in their countries of. The majority of them see themselves as Arab Jews.

"In Iraq, for example, Jewish social and religious institutions flourished and Jews served as government ministers, as Communist party leaders and they practically invented the country's financial and monetary system in 1932."

But political actions by the Israeli Mossad they left for Israel, a decision which many regretted. Before the creation of Israel, 80000 Jews lived in Iraq. Ezra Levy, the last Rabbi of Baghdad's last synagogue, Mer Taweig, came to Israel in 2003 and is totally disappointed:

"The Muslims were more than a family to me. I don't know why I left them to come here. It's better to have good friends than Jewish friends."

Ezra saw himself as an "Iraqi Jew, not a Jewish Iraqi". Upon arrival in Israel, the same Baghdad Jews who had led Iraq's cultural renaissance were sprayed with DDT and sent to tin shack transit camps, so Neslen. The discrimination of the Mizrahim and the immigrants from

Ethiopia by the ruling Ashkenasi elite has not been dealt with in Israel adequately.

Until June 1967 large sectors of the religious establishment resisted the secular Zionist concept. The military success in the June war was interpreted by many religious Jews as a sign that the Messiah had returned. The religious believed that

"Israel's destiny was to become 'a light unto the nations' rather than a nation like any other".

Their Jewish identity is rooted in "b'toche" which means "faith" and not in "bitachon" which means "security". Both concepts may hold together 80% of Israel that is Jewish, but it also tears them apart, so the author.

In ten chapters immigrants and sabras, Israelis born in the country, speak about their feelings, longings, sorrows, and disappointments. Since the establishment of Israel the country followed a "melting pot"-strategy, initially called „Kur Hitukh“ (melting reactor) for newly arrived Diaspora Jews. Their old identities would be dissolved and fused into a nation rising from the ashes of Holocaust. For the Mizrahim the concept has borne only moderate success like Rabbi Ezra Levy mentioned. But there are other immigrants who are excited to live in Israel like David Weizmann, a 37-year-old French PR executive, who made aliyah after it came in 2003 to anti-semitic incidents in France. For Weizmann "Israel is a miracle", and he wants to "part of it". He believes in the country's values.

"Israel is the solution for Jewish security and I wanted to raise my three kids here."

By comparison, Olga und Dimitri are totally disappointed. They do not feel like Israelis but as Russians. "Russia is still my homeland, my culture, my language. We brought Russia to Israel." Both want to emigrate to Canada because the Israelis are biased towards Russians.

"I think the government realised that we had the potential to change this society. They were afraid and so they tried to stop us, by denying us opportunities. 'Zionism' is an empty phrase. It's like a soup balloon."

Most of the Russian immigrants are heavily biased towards Palestinians. They

"only understand the language of force and power. I believe the army should show them no mercy. They should take radical measures. It's like Chechnya. We don't have a negotiating partner. They should use all means to fight the terror."

Other underdogs like the Mizrahi Jew Rafi Shubeli do not want to leave Israel. He sits on the board of the Keshet Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, a civil rights group. He considers himself a non-Zionist, because "Zionism is racism directed at me, and the Arab world". The situation of the Jews in Yemen "had become impossible because of Zionists here". "We were victims of Zionism." Whether the Mizrahim have suffered a "cultural holocaust" Shubeli answers:

"Yes, We are suffering it still. I see kids poisoned in schools and I can do nothing. My nephew told me 'I don't like studying Arabic because Arabs are bad people'."

Totally different from all others is Hanan Porat, the most famous religious Zionist in Israel. He was a former leader of the far right National Religious Party. Porat studied together with Moshe Levinger and Menachem Froman at Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook's Merkaz Ha Rav yeshiva. They founded the Gush Emunim (block of the faithful) settler's movement. His views are extreme and totally bizarre:

„Undoubtedly, it's not just Sharon, it's the general attitude in the western world that you should understand and compromise with terror. Arab terror is a whole philosophy which wants to control the world. In that context, Sharon's plan is a criminal act because it cuts people off from their land for political – not security – reasons. That's why I objected to the peace-time transfer of Arabs.”

The evacuation of Israelis from the Gaza strip was “immoral, unJewish and violates human rights”. In contrast to Porat Menachem Froman was a close friend of Yassir Arafat. Despite his support for the Palestinians he gave a strange definition of the occupation:

„The Palestinians are under Israel's control for the same reason that the tigers in London Zoo are not free.“

Arthur Neslen shows also that there exists a movement away from Zion. Some Israelis are searching for a new identity for their country.

„The diaspora clock, which Zionism tried to turn back to year zero, is ticking again.“

Whether Yaron Pe'er represents other Israelis except himself may be doubtful. From Greece dissent, he lives as a musician in Ras-as-Satan in the Sinai peninsula; he has a very interesting personality. For him God does not belong to the people. He “is not Jewish”. One loses one's richness if

„you talk about the Jewish God because it's also the Muslim God and the Christian God. Through the one you can see the many.”

In a certain way I feel more secure outside Israel.

“I think a big disaster is coming which will take Israel to the bottom of the bottom, a place where the father will finally understand that the one child he lost was also lost on the other side, and the one child that is left is very precious.“

This is an colourful mosaic of Israeli identity and a fascinating book on Israel's multiplicity.

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In: Orient, (2006) 4, S. 577-579.